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**Subject:** News Update: EPA Science Advisor Reviewing Ways To Increase Risk Forum's Efficiency (ToxicsRegulationNews)

# EPA Science Advisor Reviewing Ways To Increase Risk Forum's Efficiency

07/29/2015

EPA's new science advisor Thomas Burke is reviewing the agency's Risk Assessment Forum (RAF), which has been struggling in recent years to finalize consensus risk policy documents, weighing whether there are ways to increase the output of the volunteer group of agency experts.

EPA created the RAF in the mid-1980s "to promote Agency-wide consensus on difficult and controversial risk assessment issues and to ensure that this consensus is incorporated into appropriate Agency risk assessment guidance," according to its website. It comprises a standing body of senior agency scientists, nominated by their individual labs, offices and regions. They serve on RAF as volunteers in four-year terms in addition to their regular duties.

Despite its august history, RAF has struggled in recent years, particularly under the direction of the last agency science advisor, Glenn Paulson, who sources blamed for RAF not publishing any new documents in 2013 -- the first time RAF did not publish since 1990.

RAF has been without a permanent executive director since late 2012, when Diane Henshel returned to her academic post at Indiana University after a year's service. Agency staff have served in acting roles since then, most recently Rita Schoeny, a senior agency scientist. Her term has also expired, and RAF staff is once again without a leader.

EPA advertised the position last fall, offering an annual salary of \$125,000-\$157,000. The ad on the federal hiring website USAjobs.gov described the director's duties as "[s]erv[ing] as the coordinator for the [RAF] and oversee[ing] the activities of senior scientists engaged in Forum activities to study and report on risk assessment issues from an Agency-wide perspective," and "[s]erv[ing] as a focal point within the Agency for responding to priority risk assessment and science

policy issues identified by the Agency Science Advisor."

Meanwhile, RAF has yet to produce any final or draft documents in 2015, raising the possibility of a reprisal of 2013.

RAF most recently published "Guidance for Applying Quantitative Data to Develop Data-Derived Extrapolation Factors for Interspecies and Intraspecies Extrapolation" last fall. It was one of three documents released since Paulson left EPA for George Washington University's public health school in the spring of 2014, after Gina McCarthy became administrator.

Now Burke is pondering priority projects for RAF and the Science Technology and Policy Council (STPC) and how to make the two groups more efficient, sources say. The science advisor chairs the STPC, a high-level agency-wide committee comprising deputy assistant administrator and deputy regional administrator-level managers. Among other science policy and planning projects, STPC oversees approval and release of RAF documents.

An EPA spokeswoman says that it "is not uncommon for EPA to evaluate its programs to ensure they are operating effectively and meeting the Agency's needs. EPA has been informally evaluating its [RAF] to identify whether there are any areas where changes could lead to improvements. The evaluation was initiated to inform internal operational decision-making prior to Dr. Burke's arrival at EPA."

#### RAF Priorities

Perhaps because of the as yet unfilled RAF management position, Burke has tapped Peter Preuss, EPA's chief innovation officer and formerly the director of the agency's influential National Center for Environmental Assessment, to serve as director of the Office of the Science Advisor, agency sources say. Preuss, who is also serving as an advisor to Burke, has been leading efforts to review STPC and RAF priorities, and RAF generally, sources say.

"EPA has created a new position, director of the Office of the Science Advisor, to more effectively support the Agency's Science Advisor," the EPA spokeswoman tells Inside EPA in response to questions. Preuss "is the interim director and we anticipate announcing the name of the new permanent director soon."

"The STPC has been looking at some rearrangements," a former EPA source says. This source and others say that staffers to STPC members are "trying to do priority setting," but it has been difficult to make decisions because Burke has been busy with competing priorities, including his confirmation hearing June 11 to be the assistant administrator for EPA's research office and the draft assessment of risks posed to drinking water sources by fracking, which the agency released June 4. The hearing led to cancellation of the STPC's scheduled June 10 meeting sources say, and it is unclear when STPC will next meet.

STPC's charter, created by former EPA science advisor and research chief Paul Anastas in 2010, calls for STPC to "review the charter on odd years . . . for currency and relevancy to agency priorities."

"One thing that is on their radar is the [RAF] and whether it is performing sufficiently, and/or should they consider other options for it," the former EPA source says. "It clearly does not have the same luster it had maybe 20 years ago."

"Anything is possible," an agency source says, adding that the forum is being reviewed, including how it operates and whether it is producing. "On the table are a whole range of options . . . The forum is being seriously looked at -- one option is killing it."

Should Burke decide to end the RAF, the question is "where do those functions go?" asks the source, who blames RAF's structure for its limited production. The volunteers elected to be RAF members are usually highly regarded senior scientists from offices across the agency, and they are "overtapped -- they have other real jobs," the source says. "The best people in the agency are just pulled lots of ways."

A second agency source, however, has not heard of any options that would lead to the RAF's end. RAF has recently created a subcommittee to discuss "priorities and process improvements" that RAF can consider recommending to Burke, this source says. The subcommittee process will take place over the summer. -- Maria Hegstad

Naseera H. Bland

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O: 703.347.0402

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